Osama is a round peg in a world of square holes. An explorer and a maverick, there is so much to learn from this free spirit who did not toe the line and carved his own path.
There is no conscious attempt to be different or sound unique. There is however, a rare authenticity and a hearty laugh that has years of experience in facing rejection and in turn rejecting what was expected from him.

Within a half an hour of the first time we met, Osama had successfully challenged my view on education, made me rethink my life choices and introduced the concept of information poverty to me. His apparently-relaxed demeanour hides an intensely dedicated human who was considered a misfit for the first 25 years of his life before he found purpose. Then he spent the next 25 years honouring it.

Born to an extremely strict father and extremely loving mother with five siblings, Osama had big shoes to fill. His father, Mohammad Ali Manzar sahab was an engineer, a role model in society and highly respected by all. In his social circle, he was progressive but God fearing, an educationist and an idealist, a sensitive patriarch of a family he expected compliance from. Osama the eldest, was the imperfect son of a perfect father.

In complete contrast, his relationship with his mother, Suraiya Bano ji was pure, unconditional and eternal. He was his most authentic self with Ammi, as he liked to call her.

Under the strict supervision of his father, Osama grew in a structured and controlled environment in Ranchi, but for two months each year he lived in a village called Islampur in West Champaran at his nana-nani’s
home with absolutely no rules, living exactly the way he wanted and learning skills from life.

There he was uninhibited and free, learning to make carts and brick bridges from scratch, to fish, swim and farm, spending most hours outdoors. It was experiential learning with no judgement at all. The contradiction between control and freedom was stark but also gave his curiosity space to breathe.

So many of us have a bit of Osama in ourselves but are taught very early to toe the line. We call children rebels if they don't succumb to societal expectations of normal. Osama is a survivor of our messed up system. He couldn't be gagged, and in spite of the towering presence of control, he grew up maybe rough around the edges but stronger for it.

A tape recorder went missing in the neighbourhood and the blame fell on two boys including Osama. His father suggested that a fair investigation be done to identify the culprit in spite of knowing Osama couldn't have done it. Many months later the tape recorder and culprit was found but young Osama was deeply affected that his father had chosen to be neutral instead of standing up for him.

The episode has stayed with him. There is hurt from his father's strict adherence to societal expectations, but also a reluctant owning of the strong moral compass inherited from Manzar sahab. Osama's honesty is refreshing in a world of well-articulated half-truths. It has been tested over years each time he preferred to face consequences over faking his
way through circumstances.

While his cousins, siblings and friends became doctors and engineers, Osama struggled throughout his academic life. Instruction-based education did not work for him at all. Experiential learning gave him an open mind that absorbed. Much later in life, he would protect his children from the path he was forced to follow. He enrolled his wonderful children, Abner and Abeni in an alternative education system through Mirambika which focuses on drawing out a child’s potential. Both children are strong independent thinking individuals comfortable living life on their own terms.
As for Osama himself, it took him eight years to graduate, with an unscheduled break to try his hand at being an Airman with the Air Force. Big mistake.

Osama made his first academic choice based on his preference when he signed up for a PG Diploma in Journalism from Aligarh. For the first time he was motivated, and was studying, writing reports and newsletters. He then moved to Delhi exploring a career in the Capital, only to be unemployed for four years.

And then he met Shaifali Chikermane.

A student of JNU at that time, Shaifali was the yin to his yang, a soulmate to his soul, and a huge pillar of care and companionship for all the years to come. They gave each other companionship, healing and support through some of their toughest times. Throughout his four unemployed years in Delhi, Osama lived off loans from friends and free food that Shaifali would sneak out from the JNU hostel.
The first real shift towards a new direction came in Dec 1994 when Osama was hired by the *Computer World* magazine as a correspondent. It gave him the unique experience of being a media professional in the world of technology. The next shift came when *Hindustan Times* chose Osama to head *Digital Hindustan Times*.

The dot com boom was just around the corner and Osama explored websites from across the world for nearly 18 hours a day over months, giving him invaluable insights into future possibilities. He started writing for International magazines about digital development in India.
Osama was finally doing what he liked and was financially secure. The day he launched digitalHT.com, a portal modelled on the lines of Yahoo, they received a 9 million dollar investment. Osama however decided to move on.

He partnered with his tech vendor at HT to start 4Cplus.com, a company that made web solutions and content management systems for Tehelka.com, all magazines of the Outlook group, Mid-Day, and several of Vernacular newspapers like Amar Ujala, Rashtriya Sahara, Dainik Jagran.

By 2001, Osama had a globally successful e-newsletter called Inomy that covered Indian digital investments and development, had earned the Chevening scholarship and authored a critically acclaimed book called Internet Economy of India.

It was around this time that Osama discovered the reality of the ‘Digital Divide’.

*It was as if a deep dark tunnel was suddenly brightly lit and I could see clearly. When people don’t have information, they can be exploited. Digital access could help people in connecting with opportunities, enabling democracy, and empowering the poor. We could actually reduce poverty by several notches.*

With this new mission in sight, Osama cashed out of his business, used the funds to buy his parents a house, and began the next phase of his
In 2002, Shaifali and Osama started Digital Empowerment Foundation from a single bedroom and meager savings with an aim to equip unreached and underserved communities of India with access to information.

DEF built digital communities through a design thinking approach. By contextualising digital tools and connectivity for the underserved they provided access and built digital infrastructure. They educated masses for digital understanding, while writing papers and opeds to influence governments to adopt policies successfully.
Training sessions to enable digital women entrepreneurs, to operate micro and nano businesses at the village level. (PC: Osama)

The National Digital Literacy Mission of the government was formulated by DEF. The widely implemented village level digital intervention Common Service Center (CSC) was co-written by them. And more recently, PM-WANI launched by the Government of India to connect villages through wifi was influenced by the Wireless for Community program of DEF.

They have digitally connected 4 million women, 6000 NGOs, 50000 artisans to use digital tools for their own business, empowerment and connectivity. They converted panchayats to Digital Panchayats, and
have enabled more than 20 million people to directly connect with their digital solutions.

Information poverty is at the root of all poverty because the poor are neither accessing information of any value to them nor are they able to produce information to their advantage in any way.

It's the tribals, aboriginals, dalits, minorities and the economically backward classes who are unconnected. People with power always have access to information. And those who have information have
Case in point, the Chanderi silk weavers who were living in abject poverty and had lost confidence in their craft. DEF connected them to digital marketing tools, taught them to archive nearly 30,000 designs through photography, use social media and e-commerce portals to directly connect to customers online. Their designs were used by three fashion designers at the Lakme Fashion Week 2018. Today, household incomes of the Chanderi weavers have increased by 30% and the total turnover of the entire 5,000 Chanderi weavers cluster has increased from 60 crore to 150 crores.
Osama on the Lakme Fashion Week Ramp, in 2014, introducing the weavers, their talent and highlighting the need to support them through digital interventions. (PC: Osama)

Our policies don't make access easy for the poor. Internet arrived in India 26 years ago and has still not reached every school, hospital, MSME and Panchayat. We need it as a part of our ecosystem. Access to information is not a privilege, it is a necessity.
The young boy who found his way alone has become this leader who is collectivising people so they are never left behind. He once told me he never pursues a funder, if his idea has merit and people find value, it will take off at the right time. And I was left thinking, how our lenses help us see the same things so differently, if only we let ourselves.

So as Steve Jobs famously once said, "Here's to the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes... the ones who see things differently."

Here's to Osama Manzar, may his tribe grow.

To support DEF's inspiring work, click here to donate.
naghma mulla

Owner of the loudest laugh in the room and a development sector professional by day, Naghma is a by-mistake CA, who writes what she feels and feels what she writes.